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Special Issue on Social Science Research Methods Education

Social sciences research methods are an important feature of many public administration programmes. Yet, until recently, little attention has been paid to methods education in this field of teaching and research (Marks and Van der Meer, 2016). The contributors to this special issue explore social science research methods education from a range of different disciplinary perspectives, including: education, social policy and sociology, medicine and health, and politics. These articles identify a series of teaching and learning issues of relevance to a range of subjects across the social sciences, including, but certainly not restricted to, public administration.

For example, the articles identify the challenge of engaging students with research methods, and particularly quantitative methods; a difficulty that has already been widely observed across the social sciences (see MacInnes, 2014; Wiles et al., 2009). Solutions to these problems are explored, including the development of new teaching strategies that encourage students to participate in their own learning. Furthermore, all of the papers identify the importance of research methods being seen as a core component of the learning experience, which is not relegated to a particular year of study or seen in isolation from the rest the curriculum. As such, the articles in this special issue of Teaching Public Administration show the shared challenges of teaching research methods experienced by different disciplines and offer practical solutions to these challenges.

This special issue furthers the research method education debate through reporting the experiences of projects funded by the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom (UK). In 2013-14 the Social Science cluster of the Academy called for proposals addressing the following: embedding research methods into the curriculum, the re-use of open educational resources in research methods teaching, communicating quantitative methods, and teaching mixed methods. All contributors to this special issue were principal investigators and grant holders of projects aligned to one or more of these themes.

The projects are part of a wider attempt to raise the profile of research methods in the UK (see Gunn, 2017a), which has seen considerable investment in curriculum innovation or staff training to improve research methods training and especially quantitative methods provision. This included £20 million in the creation of 15 Q-Step centres based in universities across the UK by several funding bodies to build quantitative methods skills and ensure a future supply of quantitative-literate graduates and postgraduates. While at this stage the results of these substantial investments largely remain to be seen, the empirical articles in this special issue show how research methods provision in the social sciences has been enhanced by Higher Education Academy funded projects.

In the first article of the series Gunn (2007a) provides an overview of the contemporary policy and pedagogical debates in research methods education in the social sciences and public administration. It also explains how the delivery of research method teaching is changing. In particular, the paper reviews the various merits of didactic and active approaches in the context of research methods teaching and learning. Gunn (2017a) shows how social science subjects can learn from each other by identifying best practice from a wide range of studies, but this should be done by tailoring these practices to individual

disciplines. This enables research methods to be embedded into the substantive curriculum and tied to subject knowledge. Furthermore Gunn (2017a) points out that there is a need for reflective teaching and continuous evaluation of the design and delivery of research method provision. This article provides a foundation for the subsequent empirical papers which form the basis of the rest of the special edition.

The second article by Clark and Foster (2017) describes the development of student-led inquiry-based quantitative workbooks for sociology and social policy undergraduates and their integration into the research methods teaching at the University of Sheffield. The analysis highlights the opportunities and challenges of using inquiry-based learning to teach quantitative methods and improve statistical literacy. It also explains how the workbooks are embedded within a degree programme following the principles of ‘constructive alignment’ – where all the components of the curriculum are aligned with each other – through the development of a ‘methods spine’. In undertaking these developments, it shows how student satisfaction has been enhanced in relation to their experience of undertaking research methods teaching.

In the third article by Forrest (2017) he explains how social science research methods are an important element of the medical education curriculum in the UK. The paper explores the new pedagogical challenges presented by the expectation medical students need to be able to demonstrate conversancy with social science relevant to medicine and health. This understanding includes the means by which these bodies of knowledge are generated through the use of social science research methods. One of the distinctive features of the paper is a mapping of the current practice of teaching social science research methods to undergraduate medical students. In doing so it identifies the need for research methods to play a more

central role in medical and health students teaching experience, citing examples of practice based projects learning involving students in the collection, analysis and presentation of ‘social science’ data as particularly beneficial to students’ research methods development.

Finally, the fourth article authored by Gunn (2017b) introduces the idea of embedding quantitative methods ‘by stealth’; where the methods are ‘hidden’ within the teaching of subject knowledge to encourage reluctant students to engage with statistical information. This paper provides a perspective from political science and focuses on how psephology – the study of elections and polling – can be used as a teaching tool. This project, which is the focus of the paper, aimed to communicate the importance of quantitative methods and demonstrate the value of quantitative skills to first year undergraduates.

Taken as a collection, this special issue of Teaching Public Administration shows that the increased emphasis on research methods education in recent years is a positive development. However, there is still more to be done to enhance student’s experience and their skills in social research methods. This collection of articles represents examples of good practice in the teaching of research methods in the social sciences. While many such examples are likely to exist, it is evident that disciplines across the social sciences must do more to share best practice, particularly strategies which develop students’ research methods knowledge and skills. In providing these examples, this special issue aims to contribute to the exchange of ideas and the research methods education debate in public administration and beyond.

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